

The Long Path to Victory

N.D. Soldier Achieves Epitome of Biathlon Success

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When Sgt. Blake Hillerson decides to do something, he's going to do it no matter what obstacles he might face along the way. When it came to becoming a world-class biathlete, he didn't let his lack of skiing ability or five years of roadblocks stop him. His fortitude paid off in March when he became the first North Dakota National Guard member ever to make the All-Guard National Biathlon Team.

"Blake did very well. It's quite the accomplishment," said Maj. Teresa Benevento, National Guard Athletic Director, of Vermont.

As part of the team, Hillerson will train mainly in Jericho, Vt., although training also takes place in Utah. During the off-season, the team often competes in Spain and Chile. Other international travel is possible, as well. For instance, the team competed in Germany in February. Some All-Guard Team members also can train with two national coaches.

"Blake was approached by the coaches and asked if he'd like to work with them," Benevento said.

With this instruction, World Cup competitions and Olympic trials may be a possibility.

"I think his accomplishments are a direct reflection of his passion for the sport," Lt. Col. Dave Skalicky, who coaches North Dakota's team, said of Hillerson. "He definitely has a passion for skiing and shooting and that's why he represents us. It's also a testament to his dedication. It's a Soldier trait."

Started with Dad

The idea to try biathlon started with Hillerson's father, James, of Fargo.

"In the fall of 2001, two months after finishing basic training at Fort Sill, Okla., some how my dad — the one who had originally encouraged me to join the Guard — found out that North Dakota had a biathlon team. Knowing that I had a keen eye on the range, he convinced me to call Bismarck about the team," Hillerson said.

He connected with the team and soon had all of the necessary equipment to compete, although he admits, "I didn't even know how to ski."

Hillerson had classic-skied as a child, but biathlon involves skate-skiing. His only Guard teammate at the time, Sgt. 1st Class Kent Pulst, of Penn., N.D., helped him, and Hillerson practiced on his own in Fargo. By 2003, North Dakota had filled a team, but “weeks before the nationals I was activated with the 142nd Engineers and within days was in Fort Carson, Colo.,” Hillerson said. The mobilization overlapped the 2004 competition, as well.

In 2005 and 2006, North Dakota was unable to pull together a full team. In the meantime, Hillerson became involved with the Nordic Ski Club at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he majors in economics. He practiced with the club and competed in 50-kilometer skiing marathons. In 2007, school commitments kept Hillerson from competing with the Guard, which had formed a team.

Worth the Wait

Hillerson’s chance finally came this year. He competed in the Central Region competition at Camp Ripley, Minn., and placed third in both the sprint and pursuit races. Then came a stressful week for the national competition in March, which also took place at Camp Ripley. Hillerson started the competition week with a 10-kilometer sprint race, in which he placed fifth and obtained 84 percent. He then quickly headed back to school, studied, took a test Tuesday and then returned to Camp Ripley for the 20-kilometer race and team events.

He knew the 20-kilometer race was his best chance for making the All-Guard Team. He needed to be within 85 percent of the leaders to qualify. He placed fifth with a time of 1 hour, 11 minutes and 10.6 seconds and within 88 percent, bringing his two-race average to 85 percent.

Hillerson then went on to help North Dakota’s team achieve its best finish ever.

“He’s an awesome teammate,” Skalicky said. “It’s just not all about Blake. He’s an awesome team player.”

Hillerson, Kent Pulst and Spec. Brandon Pulst of Grand Forks placed fourth in the 3-by-7.5-kilometer relay. The North Dakota team also placed fifth in the 12-kilometer patrol race, which included team members Hillerson, Kent Pulst, Brandon Pulst and Spec. Hilary Mehrer of Bismarck. Altogether, the team placed sixth out of the 18 states competing at nationals.